

Winefront – Mike Bennie, November 2022

Ata Rangi Historical Tasting

1994 — 2019

Martinborough, New Zealand.



All tasted from magnum. A room full of significant NZ media and those who have touched Ata Rangi in special ways, including the broader Paton family, the winemakers of past and present. A celebration. In the new, flash tasting room (actually very homely). “This is us driving to make the best wines possible”, says Helen Masters, “making shit happen”.

1994 (13.5%) – From a year affected by the eruption of Mt Pinatubo (1992/93) where dry cool growing season and small crops followed.

Amazing perfume, potpourri, fresh cherries, game meat, and undergrowth characters in spades. Supple in texture, refreshing, orange and cherry pip acidity lifting sour-sweet raspberry fruits, some game meat and faint clove and woody spice notes. Has this autumnal feel to it but such ease to it all. Expansive and beautiful expression in a primo spot. 96 points

1995 (13.5%) – Warm season, late rain, an earlier pick with some botrytis challenges. It was declared a ‘lighter style’.

Bronze coloured. Dried cherry, light Bonox/beef stock characters, pencil shavings, dark chocolate, tobacco and old spice cupboard to sniff on. Palate is washy, a bit into the stewed/dried fruit spectrum but feels light and silty in texture. Savoury, meaty finish. Good wine, savoury and expansive. Feels serious as an older wine. 93 points

1996 (13.5%) – Declared a textbook season. Pristine condition grapes.

Meaty, savoury expression, quite dark fruited, new leather characters, sour-sweet rhubarb and stewed raspberry, a bit of Vegemite and meatiness with some autumnal, dried leaf/dried herb and truffle characters in tow. Very savoury now. Fuller figured, for an older wine. Smooth overall. Losing some pinosity but pleasing, maturing wine. 92 points

1997 (13.5%) – Cooler set up to vintage then an Indian summer. Lower cropping year. Dark cherry, mocha and Bonox characters to sniff on. Some dried flowers, crushed, dried leaf and brambles in the mix too. A suite of brown spice to taste, dried porcini, dried cranberry and some faint leathery notes to taste. Quite thick set, thicker tannin profile, beefy and mature. 92 points

1998 (13.5%) – Hot, drought-riddled summer. Seriously hot. Bold and brassy, stewed fruits, ground mixed nuts, cocoa powder, liquorice and beef drippings to sniff on. Glossy texture, savoury spice, stewed fruits, dried plum, salted liquorice to taste. Has some grip and thrust to it. Brasher expression here. 92 points

1999 (13.5%) – Low cropping year. Warm and dry conditions. A cellaring year, they say. Dark cherry, sour plum, fennel and dried meat scents and flavours. Satiny and plush in texture, bright and youthful feel despite the age and lick of mushroomy secondary characters to taste. Almost sappy in texture. Vibrant, fresh and bright, cherry finish. Very good space. Finesse. And time to burn. 94 points

2000 (14%) – An outstanding year, is the quip. Brown rim colour with garnet core. Looks older than the 1999 by some. Haxy textured, dried cranberry, dried cherry aromas and to taste. Plush in the palate with some silty grip. A lot of mushroom and truffle with some juiciness, some beefy notes and some rhubarb stew characters going on. Still quite tight and pent up. Finishes with dry leafy characters, a bit short, but pleasing in its maturity and swish. Savoury. Very good. 94 points

2001 (14%) – Cold spring, frosts and hail! A fine vintage, after all that. Good crops and good fruit came in. Faintly minty in scent, red currants, leafy brambles, sour cherry, sweet-fruited scents with rosy floral lift. Yum. The palate is plush, supple, very primary fruited, a lick of beef drippings and hops flavours in that slurp of dark cherry, orange and beefy things. Firm and succulent in one. Very good here. Evocative and serious wine. 95 points

2002 (14%) – Wet, wet. Huge canopies. Then a bit of a dry spell. But the word was 'challenging' regarding vintage. Dark and sour cherry, stewed plums, salted liquorice, woody spices and some leafy, tomato juice characters to sniff on and taste. Savoury flavours, indeed. Sour sweet a motif. Washy texture but still quite harmonious in all that oddity/under-over ripeness character. A bit of cork flavour here too, not TCA, wet hay and the like. Firm, bitter finish. Not quite there. 89 points

2003 (13.5%) – Frosts did in half the fruit. Variable season. Very low yields (less than one tonne to acre).

Dark cherry, malt and liquorice notes, mushroom and beef consommé. Very potent to taste, rigid in tannin profile, angular and dense, grippy with malty tannin texture and finishes a touch woody and with dried fruits. A bit frazzled as an expression but for those seeking some oomph from mature pinot, here's the ticket. 90 points

2004 (14%) – Helen Masters at the helm with this her first vintage. Trial by fire. Stressful start with heaps of rain. The whole carpark flooded. Botrytis was rampant, but the follow up sorting was serious. Mellow and plush yet with chewy tannins bringing life still. Dark cherry, mocha, sweet earthiness, new leather, clove spice and beefy characters. Sour-tart acidity perking things up. Feels relaxed and savoury. Expansive in the palate, gentle and mushroomy. Glossy and light. Nice place. 93 points

2004
Helen Masters at the helm with this, her first vintage. Trial by fire. Stressful start with heaps of rain. The whole carpark flooded. Botrytis was rampant, but the follow up sorting was serious.

2005 (13.5%) – Cool early start to season. Rained a bit during wrong bits then fined up. Hard picking regime.

Truffle and toastiness, roast meats, dark cherry, sour plum, salted liquorice and leathery notes. Noted lack of energy. Still good, but sinewy and chewy, drying out and getting dusty, albeit a bit of juiciness, dark plum, the last juice in a raisin, barbecue meat kind of feel. No sweet fruit left? Perhaps. Tannin structure pretty serious. Interesting and kind of quirky, and enjoyable in its dark, seedy, tannin driven way. 93 points

2006 (13.5%) – Decent season not without challenges but end result was good crop and healthy fruit.

Like this. Very rosy/rose petal/rose hip tea scented with whiffs of dried cherry, clove, game meat and truffle. Slick and silky in the palate with a little grip. Dark cherry, booze-soaked berries, orange, warm brown spice and anise characters. Serious feeling, potent, tightly wound and tannin shaped. Very good space. Lively. 94 points

2007 (14%) – Late frost and cool end to 2006, with cooler weather overall and a good season with clean fruit resulted.

Dark and brooding scents. Lots of beef consommé, dark chocolate, plum, liquorice. The palate not far off, juicy and fleshy with a sheath of lacy tannins in tow. A sense of freshness and vitality too, despite the darker fruit and nutty savouriness. A little stewed and warm, a bit of coffee grounds to finish, hence warmer, earthier feel. Decent, to very decent. 93 points

2008 (13.5%) – Top notch vintage. Pretty much perfect approach and execution. Maybe slightly warmer year.

Beautiful and brilliantly vibrant, pure, supple, flowing. Red cherry, raspberry, all joyous and fruit forward. Satiny textured, layers of grippy spice, fine tannin chew and a long, blood orange finish. Fresh! Savoury elements, truffley. Yes, thanks. It's a structured yet expansive wine. Wonderful. 96 points

2009 (13.5%) – Crop needed thinning. A bit of heat intervened. Warmer than average year was the resulting commentary overall.

Meaty, gamey and stewed berry scents. Ripe flavours, soft and supple. Still in fine fettle albeit soft and pudgy, ripe feeling and a bit mono dimensional. That being said, the freshness will be very appealing. Orange/Campari to finish with some clove-woody spice grip. Decent place. 92 points

2010 – Switching to organic farming. Slow, cooler year to harvest.

Big, bold perfume. Choc-cherry, sappy raspberry, beef consommé, Vegemite and mushroom. Soft in texture, almost gummy, very sweet fruited, ripe raspberry coulis and strawberry-vanilla cream going on. Almost unusual for the cooler year; so fruity and forward. A Campari and clove lick tightens things up to finish. Still, lots of pleasure here. 93 points

2011 – First year of farming organically, heading to certification. Warm weather through to hot weather. Riper year.

Lively, swishy, silky expression. Lush and moreish, ripe and dried cherries, savoury mushroom elements, dried leaf, brambles – really good array of ferrous, meaty, savoury things and a kind of autumnal feel overall. Succulent, firming fine tannins doing their thing. Excellent length finishes lightly soupy and lingers beautifully in that way. Outstanding wine in a prime zone. 96 points*

There was a claim this bottle was corked by a few learned elders in the room, a second magnum was opened, which was very corked. The original bottle to me showed excellent savoury characters, not TCA.

A 750ml 2011 wine was opened: distinctly similar to the magnum, albeit a bit more sterile, strict, tightly wound and angular. Lots of concentration and tension here. I like the more relaxed original 2011 magnum for its savouriness and succulence. Perfume is a bit mute. Very good wine in its flurry of youth. Needs time. 94 points



Helen Masters & Mike Bennie

2012 – Cooler year. Quite a bit of rain through the critical bits. Late, late harvest. “Could have been a complete disaster”, offers Clive Paton, “there’d been incredibly cold days in summer with rain everywhere, but whipped into shape by three weeks of pristine April weather; we ended up with a wine that’s pretty amazing all things considered”.

Lots of Campari and Aperol here! Negronis ahoy! It’s very savoury-sweet with tart, botanical detail over dried cherry, cranberry and white strawberry characters. Flesh and bounce, energy and freshness. Good length, tension and structure. Dusty finish and yet succulent. Leaner expression but very good. 94 points

2013 – A warmer year again. Balanced in harvest with everything.

Beefy, richer style, drying out a touch but with good, cocoa-powder tannins in play and lots of ripe, black cherry. Lots of dark cherry, meatiness, chalky minerality here. Tense and structured, a web of that fine, grippy tannin taking things to a seriously strict but still pliant level. It tastes dark fruited, spicy, rich but chewy. Classy yet powerful. Nice. 94+ points

2014 (14%) – Three weeks early to kick off. Picking earlier. Cool summer too.

Dark cherry, game meat, dried rose petals, white pepper and green stemmy freshness.

Supple texture, bright and crisp in red berry fruitiness, a lick of sugared almonds, blood orange and Campari to finish. Bright, vivacious style, sheathed in fine tannin and very long and tight to finish. Excellent if not a bit open weave and sweet at this stage of its life. 93 points

2015 (13%) – Lower yield. Decent harvest with some vagaries but worked out well. Windy year, allegedly. “A gnarly wine to release, acid and tannin driven due to that season and all that wind”, says Helen Masters, “we lost whole nets to wind; just blown away”. Game meat, rose water, red cherry and raspberry scents. Red cherry to taste, green herbs, mushroom and very firm, chalky tannins lending strictness and chewy pucker.

Indeed, so tightly wound, a very structured and seamless wine of intensity and needing way more time to show best. 94+ points

2016 (13%) – Fine and even vintage if not a bit early.

Fleshy characters here, supple, flowing, lush in a way with concentrated, red berry and raspberry fruit characters, botanical elements, musk and truffle with leathery notes in tow. Compact and deep, very potent expression of the variety with big energy in tow. Some dusty, graphite pucker to finish, a touch short? Maybe. Good intensity and flow aside that. 94 points

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Clive Paton

2017 (13%) – Cooler start to the year. Higher acid profile year. The midst of the big whole bunch era too. Opening the wines up to have a bit more expression.

Supple, succulent, lithe and fresh expression here. Vibrant and juicy, a web of light, fine tannins tucking things in. Some black olive, a bit of alpine herb, great detail in tow. Very complex and compact wine of invigorating energy and freshness. Serious tannins – Italianate in nature. Stellar wine, if not too tight right now! 95+ points

2018 (13.5%) – Quite a bit of heat in 2018 then a bit of wet and cool.

Crisp and cool, vibrant and fresh. A less ripe red berry spectrum of fruit, some vanilla creaminess but light on, clove spice, tobacco-laced tannins, good grip and freshness to finish. Sappy, savoury style, pretty, bright and refreshing with exceptional length, tension, and finesse on hand. Drinks charmingly, albeit pretty quiet. 94 points

2019 (13.5%) – “A year for understanding concentration, drive and length”, says Helen Masters.

Even and soft textured, good concentration and lift. Has some very primary, almost kirsch like characters now. Succulent tannins, very bright feel to the wine, inward concentration and depth. Grippy, firm, long. Very good example. 94 points

2019 Abel Old Vine (13.5%) – A one barrel bottling of only Abel clone pinot noir, all bottled to magnum only. Unique! A celebration of 40 years on the land (Ata Rangi and this clone planted by them). Not available commercially now, taken up by members and cellar door. Abel clone on its own roots. Unless you find some...

Chocolatey and rich, quite compact and tightly wound but fresh feeling overall. Slinks along all mellow and sexy, kind of sweet fruited, plummy, but with sleekness and this cool fringe of alpine herbal lift and faint white pepper. Almost a milky, iced chocolate feel to the wine. Minty highlights too. Huge drinkability, relatively simple perhaps. Such a lovely drink. 93 points
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Thanks for the support from Helen Masters and the team at Ata Rangi to get me to this tasting (and the regional tasting that surrounded it). Grateful for that support.

